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TAGS: [ASEC](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PINL](#) [VN](#) [CU](#) [BL](#)
SUBJECT: MILITARY STANDDOWN MORE LIKELY THAN HEAVY HAND

REF: A. LA PAZ 3261
[1](#)B. LA PAZ 3119

Classified By: EcoPol Chief Mike Hammer for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (S) Summary: Over the past couple of days statements from military leaders have taken a conciliatory tone and moved away from the confrontational rhetoric from Armed Forces Commander General Wilfredo Vargas. Vargas relayed a message to the Ambassador that his troops would only intervene in "Media Luna" opposition states if leaders clearly break with the constitution, for example by declaring independence. The Vice President echoed a similar message in a December 14 meeting when he told the Ambassador that the government is not planning a state of siege or military action unless it is required to defend government offices or protect the people. Although the military is making plans to deploy 70 additional companies to opposition-led departments (states), military planners have told us that President Evo Morales has given them instructions not to incur civilian casualties. Field commanders continue to tell us they will require a written order from President Morales if asked to commit violence against opposition demonstrators. Even with such an order, commanders are prepared to stand down and confine their troops to barracks. Imposing a police state on rebel departments presents several difficulties: the military views this as strictly a police function; the military does not presently have the supplies or logistics in place to conduct such an operation; many key officers have ties with the opposition departments in the Media Luna; and the military knows based on past history that they will be held accountable. An influential senator told us the opposition is not nearly as concerned with military heavy handedness as they are with altiplano police and mysterious "foreign" fighters. End Summary.

Vargas: With Evo or Against Evo?

[1](#)2. (S)xxxxxxxxxxxxx asked Military Group Commander on December 13 to tell the Ambassador that in case of confrontations in opposition-led "Media Luna" departments (states), troops would be deployed in the same manner as during the violent November 23-24 Sucre demonstrations: troops would protect military and government property, but would not enforce a crackdown on civilians. This contradicted xxxxxxxxxxxx' December 7 public statement that "the true cowards are in the (opposition-controlled) Media

Luna" and that the military would "defend the homeland" in Santa Cruz to ensure "the security of all." Although he called for increased political dialogue, xxxxxxxxxxxx laid the blame for any conflict in the future squarely with the opposition for provoking and misinforming Bolivians, without offering "any substantive solutions." But now xxxxxxxxxxxx has changed his tune, saying he would only use the military to quell civil disorder if the opposition acted in a clearly unconstitutional way, for example by declaring independence. He did not consider the proposal of autonomy statutes to be a clear violation of the constitution. xxxxxxxxxxxx did stress, however, that he would not tolerate insubordination or coup plotting within his ranks. The Ambassador was also assured by Vice President Garcia Linera on December 14 that the government would not declare a state of siege or use the military unless it needed to defend government offices or protect people.

13. (S) That xxxxxxxxxxxx made his highly-political comments xxxxxxxxxxxx angered many commanders. Many commanders were also critical of xxxxxxxxxxxx, as they feared it opened the military to charges of taking political sides beyond its institutional role.xxxxxxxxxx

14. (C) xxxxxxxxxxxx had been,xxxxxxxxxx a supporter of U.S.-Bolivian military relations. Although he continues to cooperate enthusiastically with us at a working level, xxxxxxxxxxxx his public comments in the last few months have irritated Bolivian military officers and raised eyebrows within the Embassy. When given an opening to defend us regarding conspiracy charges, he only said the charges should be investigated. When given a chance to opine on Morales' celebration of Che Guevara's 1967 rebellion and criticism of Bolivian troops, he said everyone has the right to their own opinion.

Setting the Groundwork for Possible Military Action

15. (C) Government rhetoric calmed somewhat this week, with officials including Morales making empty overtures about dialogue and stressing that the opposition, not the government, is pushing the country to conflict. But government officials also warned that if dialogue failed and opposition "sedition" continued, the government would have no choice but to use force. "The state is disposed to use institutions of force to preserve internal order and democratic stability," said Government Minister Alfredo Rada. Rada's Vice-Minister Ruben Gamarra said the government would not allow department or civic officials to "threaten the unity of the country" as a matter of constitutional obligation. Gamarra said the military also supports this position. The Vice President also told the Ambassador that "the president and I must guarantee the country's integrity and stability." The Ambassador made clear that the United States supports a united and democratic Bolivia.

Military Leaders Stress Calm and Police Role

16. (C) On December 12, the military spoke for itself, backing away from confrontational remarks. Minister of Defense Walker San Miguel confirmed that the armed forces were on alert, but said the motive was to protect public and private property, not to quell unrest. San Miguel told the press the police are responsible for maintaining civil order, not the military. San Miguel discounted any possibility of declaring a state of emergency in opposition departments and criticized "paranoid" opposition leaders for asserting that President Morales had ordered an imminent "militarization." (Note: Opposition rumors include appointing military officers temporarily to state and city civilian leadership positions. End Note.) San Miguel explained although there had been no troop mobilizations, the military remains "concerned." Army Commander Freddy Bersatti said he hoped God would guide opposition leaders to make good decisions "for the peace and coexistence of all Bolivians."

Military to Retreat from Civilian Confrontations

¶7. (C) Planning of troop deployments to opposition departments was conducted December 7 and 8 and continued to be refined this week. Participating commanders told us the deployment would involve 70 companies. Army Chief of Staff Gen. Freddy Mackay, Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Daniel Salazar, and Navy Chief of Staff Admiral Ernesto Roca are the chief planners.

¶8. (S) A senior military planner told DAO December 13 that President Morales wants the military to be careful to avoid violent confrontations with demonstrators if called upon to support Bolivian police. Despite public bravado, the planner said Morales understands deaths will erode political support.

He confirmed some units have already deployed to key locations throughout the Media Luna to secure gas lines, public utilities, and government buildings. The planner said the units would not be armed and would incorporate local indigenous to minimize the potential for conflict. If the opposition attempts to take these strategic locations by force, the military would retreat.

Santa Chavez to Fund Bolivian Deployments

¶9. (S) Until recently, it was unclear how such a deployment would be funded. However, military contacts said December 13 that \$5 million became available this week to fund an increased military presence in opposition-led departments and another \$1.3 million had been allocated for non-lethal supplies, such as riot-control gas. The money was supposedly freed up from Venezuelan sources, but this is not confirmed. It will take time, at least two weeks, before the new funding results in equipped troops on the ground in opposition departments.

¶10. (C) Supply and logistics issues continue to be an operational impediment to any proposed military crackdown, and it may take months before the new funding resolves these shortcomings at remote posts. Bolivia has not spent any money on ammunition in two years, and the capacity to quickly move troops remains in doubt. xxxxxxxxxxxx told xxxxxxxxxxxx he had only two trucks and enough fuel to send his single plane on one reconnaissance mission.

Venezuelan Cash and Foreign Fighters

¶11. (S) xxxxxxxxxxxx said Morales understands he risks losing the military if he pushes them into a police force role. Because of this, he felt Morales would rely on the police from the altiplano and "volunteers from other countries" to combat opposition forces should an open conflict develop. xxxxxxxxxxxx said Cuban hospitals could easily be "converted to barracks," but had no idea how many Venezuelan and Cubans would be willing or available to fight for Evo's government.

¶12. (S) Military contacts are concerned a few rogue commanders might obey orders to enforce a police state, their loyalty greased with Venezuelan pay-offs. They asserted Venezuelan money would also make it difficult for the high-command to refuse such orders. Although Venezuelan "bonuses" have cemented some loyalty, it has also created much resentment in the mid- and lower-ranks and cost the high command significant legitimacy. According xxxxxxxxxxxx and field commanders, there is also a high degree of frustration with the perceived meddling of Venezuelan advisors in the internal functions of the military and of overtly political statements and actions of the high command (such as Army Commander Bersatti's decision to wear a red poncho in solidarity with the violent, pro-government Red Ponchos group a year ago).

Mixed Signals on Holiday Troop Strength

¶13. (C) Although planning and funding appear to be in place, the military was sending out mixed signals as to its intentions. There has been no order to extend assignments or cancel leave, as would be expected prior to a major military undertaking. About 70 percent of the army's conscript force will be rotating during the first two weeks of January. Allowing inexperienced troops to transfer into the bulk of Media Luna enlisted positions, rather than keeping its existing troops in place, might signal that the government does not anticipate a major conflict in the near-future. However, a senior military planner told DATT that keeping the conscripts from rotating would be "more trouble than it is worth" and that new troops would be more motivated. He also anticipated an order canceling leave before December 19. Another potential tripwire: graduations at the military academy in Cochabamba Department were moved up four days to December 12.

Field Commanders Set to Stand Down

¶14. (S) Although xxxxxxxxxxxx and others in the high command may be coy, many field commanders continue to tell us they will not participate in violence against opposition demonstrations. xxxxxxxxxxxx was on hand when a high-ranking civil defense officer told the commander in Tarija Department to demand a written order from President Morales if asked to take action against opposition leaders or demonstrators. If they received such an order, the officer advised non-compliance and a post lock down to commanders from Cochabamba, Santa Cruz, and Tarija. The civil defense officer told MILGP Commander he expects commanders will not use force.

¶15. (C) xxxxxxxxxxxx told Emboff that Minister of Government Rada contacted the Navy leadership when violent protests broke out in Cobija, Pando on November 30 and asked the Navy to step in and enforce order (Note: the Navy is the strongest military branch in the department of Pando). Navy commanders said they would comply when provided a signed order from Morales. Rada never called back. xxxxxxxxxxxx told PolOffs the air force in Cobija was similarly requested to take control of the civilian airport, requested a written order, and never got one.

X-Factors: Institutionalism, Regionalism, and Wives

¶16. (C) xxxxxxxxxxxx told us despite government and high-command rhetoric about the military's "constitutional role," most commanders thought the government violated the law and the constitution by excluding the opposition from key sessions of Congress and the Constituent Assembly and, therefore, "have no right to invoke the constitution." A strong commitment to institutionalism would require a rock-solid constitutional argument before commanders would participate in any action that could be considered "political."

¶17. (C) xxxxxxxxxxxx said commanders ultimately place loyalty to their region above all other considerations. Although most commanders are originally from the altiplano, they have spent most of their careers stationed in the Media Luna. He said many officers worked with the same opposition leaders the government might call on them to unseat, a prospect he found "very unlikely." Many altiplano officers marry in the Media Luna and have family there. As for the large minority of officers from the Media Luna, including himself, Suarez said there is "no way any of us are going to attack our own people." Rather, he said, they would side with the opposition if forced to take sides.

xxxxxxxxxxxx "Divided" Military Won't Intervene

¶18. (C) xxxxxxxxxxxx told PolOff December 14 the opposition did not believe the "divided" military would repress them, but were more concerned about irregular pro-government militias organized and financed by

Venezuelans and Cubans. xxxxxxxxxxxx, however, provided no details on the supposed paramilitary organizations. xxxxxxxxxxxx said, in any event, he expected no violent stand-off with the government before January as both sides are "disorganized."

Comment:

¶19. (C) The best the government can hope for if it gives the order to bust opposition heads is sporadic and half-hearted compliance from a minority of commanders. Although they can be expected to protect government infrastructure and transportation, most commanders are likely to sit out any violent confrontation with opposition forces. Consistent with our November assessment (Reftel B), we continue to believe the military will choose to ignore orders that are not solidly linked to their constitutional role, in writing, or that requires them to spill Bolivian blood.

¶20. (C) Despite bravado from field commanders, DAO expects them to frame any potential insubordination as "selective non-compliance" to their superiors. Although field commanders may be anxious about day after scenarios if they disobey orders, it would be difficult for the government to replace "insubordinate" officers, particularly if officers refused such orders en masse. It is unlikely the government would find more loyal commanders in the lower ranks, uncertain if rank and file troops would recognize them, and unclear if such an overly political reorganization would be tolerated by the high command. Unlike his erstwhile ally Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, Evo does not have a network of personal friends within the military (although his Presidency Minister Juan Quintana does), and the military is leery of taking on any role considered remotely political. The military fears above all a repeat of the bloody military-civilian conflicts in El Alto in 2003, which brought down the Goni government. Many commanders are still bitter about the fallout from those events and believe the military took the risks and the blame for political decisions.

¶21. (C) xxxxxxxxxxxx remains an enigma. Some commanders suspected, at least xxxxxxxxxxxx, that he might be sympathetic to a coup. He is widely characterized as an "opportunist" xxxxxxxxxxxx. Under intense pressure from both political sides, he plays both sides. We cannot expect him to stand behind his assurances. End Comment.

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